

Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne on the First Sunday after Trinity at the 10am Sung Eucharist St Mary's Barnes 23 June 2019

Both of our readings today – the Old Testament reading from the First Book of Kings (1 Kings 19.1-15a), and the Gospel reading from Luke (Luke 8.26-39) – have something in common – they both describe a situation in which an individual is in great distress. And they both tell the story of how God helps that individual to be released from terrible distress. We all have times in our lives when things go wrong and we find ourselves unexpectedly in a challenging situation, in which we might be overcome by fears and anxiety and a dread of what might happen to us next. Such times remind us all too painfully of how fragile it is to be a human being. Success in life can cushion us from this realisation. When things go well for us, especially perhaps when we are younger, we can feel that the world is at our feet and we are capable of great things and vistas of promise open up before us in our imaginations. But this is not so when we find the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, to quote Shakespeare, are suddenly pointed in our direction.

In our first reading from Kings we have a cameo of one of the great Old Testament prophets, Elijah. Elijah has just experienced one of the greatest successes, perhaps the greatest success, of his life. Elijah has proved on Mount Carmel, with God's help, that he is a true prophet, in contrast with the false prophets of Baal. And he did this in a most dramatic, unforgettable way, by calling down fire from heaven. But Elijah's victory over his enemies comes with a price: for it arouses even more hostility against him from the bad king Ahab and his even more evil wife Jezebel. Jezebel sends Elijah a death-threat. And what does Elijah do? Stand his ground? No, he is terrified, and flees for his life into the wilderness. And finding himself in the wilderness, despite his recent spiritual triumph, he gets thoroughly depressed. So much so, that he sits under a solitary broom tree and pleads with God that he might die. He has had enough, even of life itself. And this situation that Elijah suddenly finds himself in is so true to life experience. For often after a great spiritual high, there can follow a spiritual slough of despond. Ups and downs seem to be woven into the very fabric of life.

Fortunately for us, God knows us through and through, and that with the right help and circumstances, we can hopefully pick ourselves up again. Sadly, this as we know too well for many, is not always so. But we can be confident that God's will for us is that we not only survive but thrive. And God is also very practical. Elijah is not only fearful; he is exhausted by his recent exploits. He needs rest and refreshment. He is blessed by God with a good sleep. And when he wakes up God sends an angel to tell him to get up and eat. God is not going to tell Elijah to go on another mission until Elijah is first restored and healed, and his bodily, emotional and spiritual needs are met. So, Elijah obediently eats and drinks, and then finds himself, after forty days, on Mount Horeb. He is back on a mountain, and he is gradually getting better. But he still has much to learn.

God asks him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

A good question for us to imagine God asking us from time to time: what are we doing here?

And Elijah pours out the tale of his recent woes: he has done great things for God, but his life is now under threat. God tells Elijah to go out of his cave and stand openly on the mountain. And then there is some more drama: a tempestuous wind, an earthquake and a fire. All rather reminiscent of Elijah's exploits on Mount Carmel. But and this is the important point, this time we are told God is not in wind, earthquake or even fire. For Elijah, that is his past. It's over. What matters is that he listens to God, experiences God, in the here and now. And this time God reveals himself to Elijah in a “sound of sheer silence”, which might be more literally translated, “a sound of stillness”. After all the drama – two contrasting dramas in fact, his spiritual triumph and also the death-threat from Jezebel - Elijah needs to reconnect with his God in a time of quietness, stillness, silence, rest. It takes

a while for Elijah to get this. And it can take a while for us to get it as well. But when he does finally get it, God recommissions Elijah. God sends him on his way, with further tasks of ministry to engage in, with other ways in which he will further God's loving purposes.

In our gospel story from Luke, Jesus meets an individual in great distress, described as a man with many demons. This miracle story, of Jesus' healing of the Gerasene Demoniac, is one which our modern, or post-modern, society may find difficult to grasp. In today's culture we talk less of demon possession and more of mental health issues. What we have here is a vivid account of Jesus encountering an individual who is deeply distressed, bodily, emotionally and spiritually. And Jesus heals him. If we feel sorry for the herd of swine who rush down the steep bank into the lake and are drowned, then we have missed the point. In the biblical narrative of both the Old and New Testaments the sea (here described as a lake) is often symbolic of chaos and disorder, of whatever might threaten us. In this healing story, with its symbolic resonances, Jesus is shown to have supreme authority over all that is evil and chaotic and destructive of people's lives. Here Jesus releases the individual from all that has had a harmful power over him and restores the demoniac not only in terms of his mental well-being, but also to his rightful place in society. The man is no longer regarded as a threat to others, nor is he any longer a threat to himself. But, rather as in the story of Elijah, it takes everyone a while to get this. At first the people are frightened of Jesus' display of authority. They would like him to go away. They don't want Jesus to take them out of their comfort zone. They would rather things stayed the way they always were. But things cannot stay the way they always were. God challenges us and calls us to new places, sometimes literally and always spiritually. As for the individual who is healed, unlike the people looking on, he would like to stay with Jesus. He too has a lesson to learn. He cannot simply be with Jesus, profoundly important though that is. He must also live for Jesus in his words and actions, proclaiming "how much Jesus had done for him".

These two stories that we have heard today are a real challenge to us. Like Elijah, we can be overcome by life events and be discouraged. But God always has the whole picture in mind. God always wants us to learn, to grow, to develop. Sometimes we might need to slow down. At other times there may be a new task to take on. Either way, we need discernment and time to listen to that "sound of sheer silence". In our current political life, our nation is in a state that is turbulent and uncertain. There is much going on that might make us anxious. Many businesses, particularly small businesses, as well as many people especially those on a low income are naturally concerned at the possibility of the UK leaving the European Union on 31st October with no deal in place. And there are troubling signs on the world scene, such as at present worsening relations between Iran and the West.

The calling for the Christian is to pray, to persevere, to be determined to live in hope, come what may. I close with some words from the first woman to write a book in English, the mediaeval spiritual writer and anchoress Julian of Norwich. In her book 'Revelations of Divine Love', she wrote of Jesus:

"He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be tempest-tossed, you will not be disquieted, but he said: You will not be overcome".